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Preparations for the special session of the General Assembly on the implementation of the outcome of the World Summit for Social Development and further initiatives

Review reports and proposals for further action and initiatives submitted by organs and specialized agencies of the United Nations system and other concerned organizations

Note by the Secretary-General

Addendum

Contribution from the United Nations Volunteers Programme**

1. The Preparatory Committee for the Special Session of the General Assembly on the Implementation of the Outcome of the World Summit for Social Development and Further Initiatives, in paragraph 14 of the annex to decision 1,[1] invited the United Nations Volunteers programme, the focal point for the international Year of Volunteers, to report on the role of volunteering in the promotion of social development and to make proposals thereon.

2. The Secretary-General accordingly circulates herewith, for the information of the Preparatory Committee, the report prepared by the United Nations Volunteers programme in response to that request.

Notes

[1] *Official Records of the General Assembly, Fifty-fourth Session, Supplement No. 45* (A/54/45 and corrigendum), chap. VI, sect. B.

* A/AC.253/12.

** The report is being issued herewith as received in the language of submission only.

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Volunteering and Social Development

Introduction

1. At the Copenhagen World Summit on Social Development in 1995 some 117 countries pledged to implement ten commitments to alleviate poverty, promote full-employment and secure social integration. Although volunteering was not specifically mentioned in Copenhagen, reference was made to the important role played by voluntary and community organisations in social and economic advance.

2. At the first Preparatory Committee for the special session of the General Assembly on the Implementation of the Outcome of the World Summit on Social Development held in May 1999, the Government of Japan proposed that the importance of volunteering for social development be addressed in the Special Session. United Nations Volunteers (UNV), as focal point for the International Year of Volunteers 2001, was invited to report on this matter and to make proposals for further initiatives to the special session of the General Assembly in June 2000. To facilitate the preparation of this report, UNV organized an international meeting of experts in the field of volunteering from all regions drawn from the public, private and voluntary sectors IN New York on 29 and 30 November.

3. This report takes as a point of departure the notion that volunteering plays a significant part in the welfare and progress of industrialized and developing countries and is the basis of much of the activity of non-governmentalorganizations, professional associations, trade unions and decentralized government services. It is, moreover, a basic vehicle by which youth, older persons, disabled people, families and other social groups participate in the cultural, economic and social life of nations. The extent and impact of volunteer action, however, goes largely unrecorded and the effect of policy measures on the willingness and ability of individuals to volunteer has, so far, been given limited consideration at both national and international level. By focusing on voluntary behavior, the international community has an opportunity to reinforce the means and capacities of people from all parts of society to engage in civic activities to the benefit of their nations, their communities and themselves.

4. The report is divided into four sections. Section 1 sets out the parameters for the discussion by looking at the definition of volunteering and the various forms it takes in different regional and national contexts - from self-help and participation to service provision and campaigning. Section 2 examines the benefits of volunteering both for society at large and the individual volunteer, focusing on the three key priority areas of the Copenhagen Declaration and Programme of Action: social integration, poverty alleviation and full employment. Section 3 focuses on key issues in volunteering, including globalisation and relations with the state and market. Section 4 offers recommendations to governments for strengthening and supporting volunteering.

Section 1: Definitions and Forms

5. Volunteering takes different forms and meanings in different settings. It is strongly influenced by

the history, politics, religion and culture of a region. What may be seen as volunteering in one country may be dismissed as low paid or labour intensive work in another. And yet, despite the wide variety of understandings, it is possible to identify some core characteristics of what constitutes a voluntary activity.

6. There are three key defining characteristics of volunteering. First the activity should not be undertaken primarily for financial reward, although the reimbursement of expenses and some token payment may be allowed. Second, the activity should be undertaken voluntarily, according to an individual's own free-will, although there are grey areas here too, such as school community service schemes which encourage, and sometimes require, students to get involved in voluntary work and Food for Work programmes, where there is an explicit exchange between community involvement and food assistance. Third, the activity should be of benefit to someone other than the volunteer, or to society at large, although it is recognised that volunteering brings significant benefit to the volunteer as well.

7. Within this broad conceptual framework it is possible to identify at least four different types of volunteer activity: mutual aid or self-help; philanthropy or service to others; participation or civic engagement; and advocacy or campaigning. Each of these types occurs in all parts of the world. However, the form each type takes and the balance or mix between different types differs markedly from country to country. Factors influencing the nature of volunteering include the economic, social and political make up of the country and its stage of development.

Mutual Aid or Self-Help

8. In many parts of the developing world mutual aid or self-help constitute the main system of social and economic support. From small informal kinship and clan groupings to more formal rotating credit associations and welfare groups, volunteering as an expression of self-help or mutual aid plays a primary role in the welfare of communities. Self-help also plays an important role in countries of the industrialised North, particularly in the health and social welfare field, where numerous organisations have been established to provide support and assistance to those in need, often organised around a particular disease or illness.

Philanthropy or Service to Others

9.Philanthropy or service to others is distinguished from self-help in that the primary recipient of the volunteering is not the member of the group him or herself, but an external third party, although most people would acknowledge that there is an element of self-interest here. This type of volunteering takes place typically within voluntary or community organisations, although in certain countries there is a strong tradition of volunteering within the public sector and a growing interest in volunteering in the corporate sector. There is also a long-standing tradition of volunteers being sent from one country to another to offer developmental and humanitarian assistance, both North to South and South to South.

Participation

10. Participation refers to the role played by individuals in the governance process, from representationon government consultation bodies to user-involvement in local developmentprojects. As a form of volunteering it is found in all countries, although it is most developed in countries with a strong tradition of civic engagement. Participation was recognised as an essential component of good governance at the Copenhagen Summit and has become the watchword of development in recent years, although there is a forceful critique which argues that much of what has passed for participation has been little more than token involvement and a means of legitimising outsiders decisions.

Advocacy or Campaigning

11. Advocacy or campaigning may be instigated and maintained by volunteers, sometimes described as activists, lobbying government for a change in legislation affecting the rights of disabled people or pushing for a worldwide ban on landmines, or for the introduction of anti-racism measures. Volunteers have paved the way for the introduction of new welfare services in the field of HIV and AIDS, have raised public consciousness about abuses of human rights and environmental destruction, and have been active in the women's movement and in democracy campaigns in many parts of the world. Some campaigns are very localised others are global in their reach. The anti-landmine campaign, for example, is estimated to have involved more than 300 million volunteers from over 100 countries.

Section 2: The Benefits of Volunteering

12. Volunteering brings benefits to both society at large and the individual volunteer. It has a role to play in contributing to each of the three priority areas outlined in the Copenhagen Declaration and Programme of Action: social integration; poverty alleviation and full employment.

13. First, volunteering makes an important economic contribution to society. In the few countries where volunteer work has been empirically studied, the contributions are estimated at between 8% and 14% of Gross Domestic Product. Given the impact of most legislation on the willingness and ability of individuals to volunteer their time (such as length of working week, school-leaving and retirement age, and measures affecting women's participation in the labour force), there is clearly a case on economic grounds alone for factoring into government considerations measures conducive to promoting a favourable environment for volunteering in all sectors and by all citizens.

14. Second, participation has long been seen as an essential element of good governance and development. Volunteering is a key means by which individuals articulate their engagement as citizens, and by building trust and reciprocity among citizens volunteering contributes to a more cohesive, stable society. One much quoted observer, Robert Putnam, has concluded that variances in performance among different parts of countries can be accounted for largely by differences in what he terms "social capital" characterized by participation in voluntary associations, or horizontal

"networks of civic engagement". Political stability and economic progress may be as much linked with social interaction as with human and physical capital. One manifestation of this is the growing body of evidence to show an inverse correlation between levels of communal strife and levels of cross-cutting civic engagement.

15. Third, volunteering helps to integrate into society people who are excluded or marginalised. For example, for people with disabilities participating in volunteering challenges negative stereotypes of disabled people as passive recipients of care. Likewise volunteering for young people offers opportunities for self-development and provides a valuable grounding in the practice of citizenship. For older people volunteering contributes positively to the process of 'active aging' by helping the newly retired adjust to life without the structure of the workplace and by improving physical and mental well-being.

16. Fourth, volunteering has a role to play in promoting full employment by enhancing the employability of unemployed people. For those in search of paid employment, volunteering can boost self-confidence, provide access to workplace networks and an opportunity for the development of specific marketable skills. Volunteering can also lead to the creation of new jobs by developing services which are later taken over by the state and market and turned into paid jobs. For example, the innovative response from volunteers worldwide to the HIV/AIDS epidemic has led to the creation of thousands of paid jobs in the public and private health sectors.

17. Despite these benefits, in many countries there is an inverse relationship between volunteering and social exclusion. The most marginalised groups in society are the least likely to participate. The barriers to participation are well-documented: poverty, unemployment, youth alienation, poor organisational practice. For volunteering to contribute most effectively to social integration it is essential that opportunities for greater involvement are opened up to people from excluded groups.

Section 3: Issues and Challenges for Volunteering

Globalisation

18. Volunteering is under pressure from the forces of globalisation. In the countries of the industrialised North there is concern that volunteering may be in decline, fuelled by a reduction in religious attachment, the break-up of traditional communities, and an increase in individualism. In the developing world concern has been expressed that economic retrenchment and cuts in public services are placing an intolerable burden on volunteers in community groups and mutual aid associations. In many countries the entry of more women into the paid labour market threatens to reduce the availability of volunteers, particularly in the care field; while a decline in civic involvement among young people has raised fears for the very future of volunteering. The Human Development Report for 1999 singled out caring labour as an essential facet of economic sustainability. The Report states that this often overlooked and little studied but essential part of human development, which is one manifestation of volunteering, is being squeezed by globalization.

It is a fundamental issue that should be of concern to all societies.

19. Not all trends, however, are working against volunteering. The aging of the population common to many parts of the world is increasing the burden on volunteer care services but it is also opening up new opportunities for voluntary work among the new and increasingly active Third Age. Although developments in communication technology run the risk of reducing social interaction, they also open up new opportunities for voluntary activity. The Internet has proved to be a powerful resource for community and campaigning groups in the spread of ideas and the mobilisation of recruits. The spread of global information technology opens up new opportunities for home-based involvement in volunteering for groups such as the disabled who were previously excluded from participation. It also provides an intergenerational bridge between youth and older people as mentoring programmes on the part of youth towards their elders inverts the conventional learning paradigm.

Relations with the State

20. Theories of market or government failure suggest that volunteers will step in to fill any gaps left by the withdrawal of business or the state. This has raised the concern that governments might be tempted to cut back on public spending in the knowledge that volunteers will pick up the pieces. Volunteers have long played a role in developing new services in response to human need - the hospice movement and the development of services for those with HIV and AIDS - being two recent examples. But there is little evidence to support the notion that volunteering will thrive in the absence of the state. Volunteering benefits from a healthy public sector. Rather than substituting for public services, volunteering complements and feeds off them.

21. Volunteering is a cost effective way of providing a range of social and welfare services. But it is not cost free. To flourish it requires an effective infrastructure, both at national and local level, to help mobilise support and match volunteers to appropriate organisations and tasks. Governments have a role to play in funding this infrastructure and in ensuring the requisite legal and fiscal framework is in place.

Relations with the Market

22. In recent years the private sector has begun to take an interest in volunteering. Both as part of a broader community investment strategy and as a means of staff development, businesses have been developing schemes to support their staff in voluntary activities in the community. Such schemes take on a variety of forms. Some employers provide time-off with pay for their staff to volunteer; others provide financial support or assistance in kind. Some employers organise a company volunteering scheme; others prefer to recognise and support existing staff involvement with non profit organizations. Whatever the precise model, evidence suggests that employer-supported volunteering increases staff skills, morale and loyalty towards the company and it also enhances the standing of business within the local community.

Section 4: Government Support for Volunteering

23. Given the diversity of volunteering it is not possible to put forward universal models for its development. What works in one country may not work in another with very different cultures and traditions. Volunteering is a product of its environment and a government scheme for promoting volunteering in Western Europe or North America may not be appropriate for Latin America or southern Africa. This is not, however, to say that lessons can not be learned and practice exchanged. Countries in the North may well hold lessons for the countries of the South keen to develop more institutionalised forms of volunteering. Similarly, models of mutual aid and community development originating in the developing world may well hold lessons for the developed world.

24. Government support for volunteering can take several forms which can be summarised under the following six headings: developing a strategic approach; raising public awareness; promoting youth volunteering; establishing an enabling environment; promoting private sector support; and influencing international organisations. Examples of concrete action governments can take under each of these headings are given below. All such action should be based on the following core principles:

- Governments should develop policies to support volunteering which are appropriate to the nature of volunteering in their particular country
- In developing such policies, governments should work in partnership with key stakeholders, including the voluntary and private sectors
- Governments should avoid the temptation to try and direct volunteering to meet their own ends and should recognise the essential independence of volunteer action.

Developing a Strategic Approach

25. In some countries governments have developed an overall, integrated strategy for promoting volunteering, in partnership with other key stakeholders from the voluntary and business sectors. The elements of such a strategy will differ from country to country but might include:

- Establishing a dedicated Unit within government for coordinating policies on volunteering and liaising with the voluntary sector and private sector as applicable
- Establishing a Budget-Line within government for funding volunteering initiatives
- Promoting the increased involvement of volunteers within the public sector
- Creating opportunities for civil servants to be seconded to voluntary organisations
- Funding an effective infrastructure within the voluntary sector at national and local level to facilitate the involvement of volunteers.

Raising Public Awareness

26. Governments can help raise public awareness about the value of volunteering and the opportunities to volunteer by, for example:

- Carrying out or funding basic research on the level of volunteering and its contribution to society in social and economic terms
- Working with the broadcast and print media to promote a positive image of volunteering and the opportunities for involvement
- Harnessing the power of information technology to direct people to available volunteering opportunities
- Recognising the contribution of volunteers through an awards system applicable to the society concerned
- Organising high profile events or 'days' to publicise the work of volunteers.

Promoting Youth Volunteering

27. Demographic changes in some regions are resulting in an alienation of young people with concomitant social problems. On the other hand, volunteering is vehicle for youth to acquire both technical and life skills. Moreover, evidence suggests that people who start to volunteer at a young age continue to do so throughout their lives. In some countries participation by young people appears to have declined while in others it has increased. In most cases there has been a shift away from more traditional forms of volunteering towards 'newer' more dynamic forms of activity, such as environmental protection. Governments have a role to play in promoting volunteering among young people by, for example:

- Promoting volunteering within the education and youth services
- Developing specific programmes to encourage youth volunteering
- Developing systems to recognise and accredit volunteering
- Working with the media and other stakeholders to present a more attractive, up-to-date image of volunteering.

Establishing an Enabling Environment

28. Governments can support volunteering by establishing an enabling legal, fiscal, and policy environment. This might include:

- Legal provision to ensure due protection for individuals who wish to volunteer their time as is the case for paid labour
- Tax incentives to encourage the setting up and funding of volunteer schemes in all sectors of society
- Reviewing all new (and existing) legislation with a view to enhancing the positive, and minimising the negative, impact on volunteering.
- Increasing citizen participation in all aspects of public administration, from planning and policy making to service delivery, monitoring and evaluation.

Promoting Private Sector Support

29. Governments can encourage the private sector to support volunteering by:

- Developing public/private partnerships which promote the involvement of volunteers
- Offering tax and other incentives for companies to support their staff in volunteering schemes

Influencing International Organisations

30. Governments should encourage international organisations such as the United Nations and the World Bank to develop their own strategies on volunteering, which might cover:

- Interaction with organizations with large volunteer components
- The involvement of volunteers in carrying out their own programmes
- The development of schemes to encourage their staff to volunteer.